

**Take a Picture. It'll Last Longer.**

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**A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Faculty of the Caudill College of Humanities  
Morehead State University**

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**In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of English**

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**by  
James Gardner**

**April 25, 2000**

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Accepted by the faculty of the Caudill College of Humanities, Morehead State University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of English degree.

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## Take a Picture. It'll Last Longer

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My thesis is a combination of poetry and fiction that deals with the “freak” in society. I define “freak” here as meaning an individual who has become ostracized by society due to their actions, beliefs and world views. Freaks are those that could perhaps be normal, that could even be great thinkers or at the very least, good people, but are prevented from doing that due to their environment. The main characters in the fiction pieces are freaks in that they are made different because they do not fit in with the conventions of their society. Their behavior is considered eccentric, odd or just plain wrong. In writing this thesis, I thought back to the psychologist Thomas Szasz who theorized that mental illness is merely behavior that deviates from societal norms. The characters do differ from the norms, some (like Dooby) to great extremes, but they each try to deal with their ostracism in distinct ways.

However, I hope to not necessarily glorify the characteristics of some of these characters- especially Arthur. Conformity, for all the damage it does to creative personalities and all the damnation it receives from people who believe themselves to be individual, is still necessary to create order in a society. However, we need the view of those outside society to see if what that society does to create order destroys free will. Despite their eccentricities and even outright flaws, these characters can give that reader that insight.

The poetry I have included in this thesis is closely related to the fiction. The poems deal with freaks dealing with a society or a majority that seems wrong or imperfect, but they also deal with themes with which the characters are trying to cope. The poems are closely related not to serve as a sort of “Cliff Notes” for the story, but to expand on themes that the stories explore and to perhaps make them more accessible to people. The font changes in the poems reflect a series of voices, either

of many people or many aspects of a personality. All these voices, whether different people or signs of a personality schism, want to belong to something that they believe is better than they are.

Accepted by:

Loyle Okland, Chair  
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Haikus of Time

Crawling sun  
Millipede's patience  
Its passing itches my skin  
The clock with cat's eyes  
Mocks me  
Makes me seem stupid  
I hear the space heater buzz  
I want to stop the hands  
The clock is broken  
The sun still passes  
I burn  
I tried to stop the sun  
Childhood  
Adulthood  
Pinewood home  
There are termites in my head

I want to start over  
As a marble statue  
I could stand the bird shit

twenty-five and still playing dress-up

what mask will I wear  
for my graduation?  
*happy, sad, laughing, penitent . . .*  
will any of these bring out the hazel in my contacts?

should I wear the mask with the bleached teeth?  
those stucco-white teeth?  
reflecting the flashbulbs they explode in my presence?  
Hmmm . . . in the right light, this mask appears to be pissing itself. curiouser and curiouser.

the humility mask would  
appear best befitting a martyr to childhood or some outdated idea I claimed to have  
once

**COULD IT FIT MY RA-LIKE FACE?**

would it distract from my goat legs? Or my penchant for flute-playing to a thudding  
heavy metal bass?

I should find a face full of flattering contours  
so the audience will become lost  
among the hills and valleys of my cheeks and nose  
never to let them ponder the crater (yes, a crater) in my heart  
made by the same Van Helsings who killed Grunge and Gothic and  
the beauty in a rainy day

choose a mask-HURRY!  
because the flashbulbs and stares of peers  
innocuously incinerate those not properly protected

studying the hole in my heart has forced on me  
the realization that I am indeed a vampire  
feeding on the accolades of my herd

I think I'll wear the wrist scars  
and put on my most tragic mask  
because I am hungry now for a little pity

I loved a lady who was a puzzle box

Kissing her cheek  
Her mouth disappears  
Brushing a wisp of her hair  
Opens three of her eyes, different colors

I long to solve her puzzle (press)  
Because I long to solve mine (kiss)  
I know our souls link somewhere (feel for the tabs)  
Our fingers lock, don't they?

When I get inside her, I open her  
To find . . . (please note here the dramatic pause, its mechanical nature)

A blank space  
Scratch that! It's just a mirror  
Another layer to go



### Damaged Goods

The sky was lead. A few iron-colored clouds were flowing over the horizon like an advancing army. On this particular morning, the sun felt compelled not to show its face. Jaime had waited all night for the sun. She was not in the least tired (in fact, she felt like her skin was covering a batch of live wires) and her eyes seem to fly open like they were on counterweights whenever she closed them. So she lay awake in the bed watching the various infomercials and music videos while her mother slept like the dead in a chair, occasionally snoring loudly.

Jaime's hand had lingered close to the call button on the side of her bed. Jaime wondered who was on duty. Gretchen? Betty? She wanted to hear a voice, but didn't because her mother, sleeping soundly in a chair, looked too comfortable to wake up. Her mother had slept only in snatches since the accident. Jaime wanted to hear a human voice talking *to* her. Not at her or about her, but talk to her and call her Jaime like she was a person and not a car with bad brakes.

Jaime touched the bandages on her face. She was still a person. Soon she forgot about the need for a human voice and wanted a mirror. My hair must be a mess, she thought and laughed halfheartedly, but it's the least of my problems.

Her mother moved. A lethargic roll to get more comfortable. The mother muttered "Jaime" in her sleep. Jaime let a smile creep on her face. Jaime felt an urge to brush the hair from her mother's eyes in a motherly fashion, maybe even kiss the forehead but her leg was in a cast. Many times she felt like she was in a medieval

torture device, especially when the need to scratch came on. But it would be taken off in a few weeks.

Without the sun, Jaime had no idea of the time. And her watch, her graduation present, was with her mother. 8:00 could not come any sooner. Her hand went to the bandages again, tugging at them slightly, feeling the tape pull slightly. The bandage, however, didn't stick to the skin, but it itched and Jaime wanted it off for good.

The news. She switched the channel to the local news. The man with the immovable hair said 6:45 and chance of thunderstorms. Her father probably wouldn't be coming today.

Jaime rubbed the smooth side of her face, remembering how her mother said she had great skin, and then felt the bandage, trying not to think about the skin under it. Another part of her was demanding to know, hence her need for it to be 8:00. Her doctor would come at eight with a pair of scissors to cut the bandages. A white knight is a shining lab coat.

6:47 said the clock below the newsman on T.V. Time crawled like the clouds overhead.

\* \* \* \* \*

The bright pink alarm clock on the nightstand read 6:51. Noah's eyes felt leaden but his body still twinged with more than a little soreness while at the same time her skin quivered with raw nervous energy. That was Raylene's effect on him.

With effort, he turned his head to look at Raylene hunkered in her nest of covers like an embryo observing its growth. Jet black hair cascading over the blue

pillows. The embroidered quilt wrapping sari-like around her lithe frame. A little crooked smile formed on her face as she cooed a little in her sleep. Her toes flexed as she was sleeping as though she was grasping at something. Her legs scissored together and then she lay still.

He liked to watch her sleep, after the sex. It was like when he won the State Championship in wrestling, the feeling of accomplishment and conquering the impossible. It made him feel more complete somehow. It made the sex more than just inserting tab A into slot B. It made it somehow more than it was. Her face looked younger than her 16 years.

He sat up in the bed and let his eyes acclimate to the darkness. The sun would have been shining in through the windows, but the sun would not show today. It was going to be dark today. The lack of sunlight and his inability to simply return to sleep made Noah, all-star wrestling captain and usually alien to introspective moments, feel like his mind was still sleeping and he was simply a machine operating without a pilot. He began to fidget with his hands because it was so uncomfortable, the feeling of operating without direction.

Raylene purred next to him. She had told Noah that her purring was a sign that the sex was good. Always a purr, never a simple sigh or even a groan. An animal purr signaled that the pleasing male who gave her sex and gave it with finesse would be called back for a repeat performance. Then that lucky male can once again take a spin around the universe—see the stars and planets and even share some tea with the Almighty—on that magical, exotic vehicle (fashioned from years of gymnastics and

back seat romps in a few Trans-Ams) known as Raylene Corwin. Raylene Corwin.

When she asked Noah what kind of tattoo she should get after one particularly glorious night of passion, he almost suggested a biohazard sign then intelligently suggested a dragon: beautiful but deadly.

Raylene, a woman who could make a sailor blush, as his Dad said, was still bad news. She had what many small towns call a "reputation." Nothing to put on your resume, just a secret something that told the old ladies shopping at the fabric store to start their whispering. One of the rumors going around about her was that she forced an accountant to leave his family, then dumped him because he left his five-year-old kid. Men who knew better and who could have been her father could be seen slowly looking into her eyes and smiling, then looking below her eyes and smiling wider. Raylene was poison, everyone said, but he still couldn't get enough.

And Noah was here in her room. Her parents were gone. His stomach was quivering like when he broke the school's sit-up record. His girlfriend in the hospital. Wanting nothing more than a hand to hold. Today especially.

A truck rumbled forlornly by the house. 7:00 the clock read. Noah's thoughts continued to grow halls and passages that his mind could be lost in, becoming a carnival hall of mirrors where each reflection had a tortured look on their collective faces.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Step right up, ladies and gentlemen. No crowding. Everyone gets a peak," brayed the barker. "Observe now the fantastically freakish, the denizens of the

darkness, the outcasts of society." He twirled his cane in the air and flashed a nicotine-stained smile to the audience. If one looked close, one could see flecks of dandruff on his handlebar mustache and on his striped jacket. His eyes carried all the emotion of glass marbles.

"I must warn you, being a respected member of society, that what you are about to see may shock and appall you. May cause everlasting psychological damage to any youngsters under the age of five." A smell drifted throughout the carnival, smells of undercooked hot dogs and funnel cakes, the lingering phantom stench of one man's halitosis. "Step right up and meet the cheerleader with half a face. Truly a horror that will leave the youngsters speechless and the older folks gasping. All that wasted potential for your amusement." The cane, like a bony finger, pulled back the curtain.

Jaime's eyes flung open, her mind desperately surfacing into reality after drowning in that dream. Hands flew to bedrails, her gown, her bandages, all confirming their reality. The gown now felt like a wet towel and her hair was plastered to her head and neck as if molding to their contours. She sucked in a few breaths of real air, savoring the taste.

A dream, she thought. A very bad dream, but a dream.

7:32 said the newsman.

Her mother came into the room, disheveled and eyes open against their will. For a few nanoseconds, she seemed perplexed whether to lay down her coffee or attend to her daughter. She placed the coffee on a tray table, miraculously not

knocking it over, and suddenly hugged Jaime. Jaime nestled her head in the crook of her mother's elbow.

"Mommy's here." The words played back what she said when Jaime was suffering other bad dreams or fevers. The mantra of "Mommy's here" was, back then, guaranteed to banish all fears. It now created a happy, unthinking drone in Jaime's head.

"It's just a nightmare," came the daughter's response. Jaime gently pushed her mother away and mustered a smile. "Just a nightmare," she said again, letting it become her mantra.

The mother smiled. She was a beautiful woman, blond hair and blue eyes like her daughter, but the strain of watching her only child suffer was showing its wear. The muscles in her face could only approximate a smile. Jaime looked at the hair of her mother sticking straw-like out of her head. The eyes struggling so hard to focus that they looked ready to pop from her head. The hands folded like in prayer or like a venus fly trap clutching prey. "Well, the doctor will be in soon anyway. Then we can get the bandages off." Her hand touched Jaime's bandaged cheek. Jaime couldn't feel it because the bandages were too thick. Not feel with the skin, anyway.

"Mom?" she ventured.

"Yes, Sweetie?"

"Is Daddy coming?"

Her mother looked out the window, arms crossed.

"Said something about a plane delay, but he wanted to say his prayers are with you."

*Love you too, Dad,* thought Jaime.

"Has Noah come yet?"

The mother looked outside the window. Clouds the color of gunmetal had rendered the morning a perpetual dusk. The overhead lights in the parking lot were still on. Jaime saw a quick look of pain cross her mother's face, like a child receiving the needle's prick in her arm. Jaime's hand went to her bandaged face. For some reason, she thought about their homecoming dance picture. Someone she didn't know said she and Noah looked like the perfect couple. God, she thought, I looked so nice then.

"He hasn't come yet." Her mother didn't start in on how big a loser Noah was, how he didn't have the drive or even the brains to do anything in this world like she usually did when the boy's name had to leave her mother's mouth. She just informed her of his status and then held her hand, still looking out her window. Jaime clasped back.

Sometimes Jaime wondered if her mom saw Dad in Noah, and that was the problem. Noah was a handsome boy, strong and with a killer smile. But he was also sensitive in a way. Noah had revealed some secrets about his family and about his mom while they lay beneath the stars in his truck bed. Noah wasn't a text on etiquette, but he was dependable.

"Thanks, Mom."

Her mother looked down. Her mother's mouth was once again trying a smile, but failing. It even seemed to twitch in effort.

"For what, sweetie?"

"For being there." She reached up and hugged her mother. Her mother hugged back. Jaime wished the sun was out so she could feel like the world was at least familiar to her. Not so unreal. She wondered why Noah hadn't called. Her bandages were temporarily forgotten as worry nestled in her stomach like a coiled cobra.

*Where the fuck is he?*

\* \* \* \* \*

Noah heard Raylene moan sleepily and turn over in the bed, wrapping a few sheets around her. Noah was zipping his fly when he noticed that he had forgotten to put on his underwear. *God, where's my head?* he thought. He frantically scanned the bedroom for them. Absently, he glanced at his watch. 7:36. Enough time for a decent breakfast after calling Jaime and saying he was only going to be a little late. He would say his mother just needed help moving some boxes.

"Morning." It was Raylene's voice, muffled with sleep. "How'd you sleep?" Noah had just found his Steelers boxer shorts when he noticed her smiling like a Cheshire cat. She grunted, stretching slender arms to the ceiling and letting the sheet fall from her naked body. The moisture left Noah's mouth. He couldn't decide whether to remove his pants and put on the underwear or simply go sans boxers.

"Fine. Great," came Noah's response. He was scouting around for his shirt. "I have to go now."



“To see her?” said Raylene matter-of-factly. She lay back on the bed, not bothering to cover herself with the sheet. “That’s right. The bandages come off today, don’t they?”

Noah worked at his belt which, for some reason, had become like a Chinese finger trap in its complexity. “That’s what she’s been talking about. Where’s my wallet?”

Raylene sat brushing her hair and, with a nod of her head, indicated the nightstand where he left it. Noah was racing around the room, a whirling dervish of activity, when Raylene, calmly brushing her hair, stopped him with five little words:

“When are you going to tell her?”

Noah stopped moving as though suddenly paralyzed. He looked out to the window. Away from Raylene. A flash of lightning illuminated the entire hillside.

“Soon. I promise.”

“But how long do we have to do this?” Noah could no longer hear the hairbrush moving through her hair but he could hear the bedsheets being gathered around her. “This sneaking around, this going a hundred miles out of town to see a movie, this hiding from everyone. Maybe I’d like some people to know I have a good boyfriend.”

Noah sighed loudly. His wadded-up underwear fell from his lifeless hand. “I’ll tell her. But she needs me right now. She’s been through so much. It’ll destroy her if I leave now. I need to help her get through this.”

“I know that, but I want something new, Noah. Something different.”

Thunder crashed, startling both lovers. Noah remembered another crash. The impact of a tree on steel and fiberglass. Jaime, tipsy from a few Flamin' Dr. Pepper's, insisted she didn't need a seatbelt. Noah, buzzed and excited that he might get lucky despite Jaime's wait-till-after-marriage policy, didn't argue. He remembered swerving, the steering wheel seemed alive and struggling in his hands. The jarring impact of the tree. Jaime launched through the windshield.

Noah was bleeding from a cut over his forehead, but he got out and saw Jaime lying a few feet away, moaning. He approached her, staggering as he went. He turned her over. So much blood. And glass. Shards sticking out of Jaime's skin.

"Am I okay?" she muttered, nearly unconscious. Noah muttered something he hoped was consoling.

The remembering hurt him. A hand went to the cut above his right eye. Only a few stitches. How many times did he hear he was lucky in that accident? One hundred? A thousand? He didn't want to bother counting anymore.

Barely audible, a creak of bedsprings, then a light whisper of bedsheet falling to the floor.

"I just need time, Raylene. That's all."

"Do you love me?" she said. Her arms encircled his taut waist, breasts pushed into his back.

"Of course," came his whisper.

"Do you really love me, Noah?" She kissed his neck and rubbed her body against his.

He turned around quickly, his arms wrapped around her lithe frame. "You know I do."

She smiled. "Then show me." Raylene kissed Noah, letting her tongue dance inside his mouth as her hands moved to the front of his jeans.

Noah couldn't get them off fast enough.

\* \* \* \* \*

As thunder and lightning were beginning their tandem assault, Jaime sat quietly with her eyes closed. Her mother thought she was sleeping but she was actually concentrating her senses underneath the bandage. Jaime imagined she could feel every new hill and valley on her face. Her face, the one she loved throughout her life, the one she watched change from cute to stunning, the one that earned her a few beauty contest crowns, was now alien.

"Who am I?" she said to the empty room. Her mother went to get some breakfast for them; Jaime practically begged for her mother to leave. Her hand itched to tear the bandage off. To touch the flesh and blood beneath it.

Jaime had plans. She would go to college, join a sorority, become a lawyer and maybe even marry Noah. She even saw what her future children looked like when she concentrated hard enough. A boy and a girl, having their best features. That lifetime was an accident ago. It was a memory that didn't get a chance to happen.

Jaime sighed. Sometimes she still wished she wrote poetry.

Jaime's eyes popped open. The clock on the news showed 7:47. Only a scant few minutes, really, considering what would happen at 8:00. Which road was she going to take? Which path would Fate drag her down and make her walk?

Jaime had imagined her return to school. In her mind's eye, she walked down the halls of her school like she always did, expecting acknowledgment from everyone. In darker moments, the same faces that greeted her and smiled at her and melted when she smiled back all turned away. They looked at their books or in their lockers or at a blank wall. She smiled, she waved, she even screamed, and they still would not look at her. She had become invisible and her skin always grew cold at that thought.

She would never consider herself a vain person. Lucky in the genetics department, but never vain. But she also realized the attention she got with her looks. She had been lucky enough to never have a chubby phase or an ugly duckling phase. She had been taught to respect her looks, but never center her life on them.

A tear gently made its way down the flawless side of her face while the other was soaked up by the bandage. What would she do? Could she live . . . without her face? Would people still want to talk to her? Will she still be a favorite in her classes? Will Noah want her? Would anyone?

*God, when did I become a hypocrite?*

Her eyes flared open, but they were a little bleary. No Noah. A frighteningly cheerful newswoman mentioned it was 7:50 with a chance for thunderstorms.

She uttered a lonely, little schoolgirl sob . . . and waited.

\* \* \* \* \*

Noah was now racing. *Who knew foreplay would take so long?*

"What about me, Noah?" Raylene said. She was sitting up in bed, smoking.

"Not now. I have to be there at eight. She'll kill me if I'm late."

"And she won't for fucking me?"

Noah didn't even have the time to retort with a dirty look. He was quickly buttoning his shirt. He was throwing his jacket and heading out the door.

"I have her number, Noah," she screamed after him. "I'll call her if you don't."

But Noah was already opening the screen door by the time Raylene mentioned having Raylene's number. It banged shut so hard, it sounded like a thunderclap. Soon, a genuine peal of thunder ripped through the sky as if offering itself up for comparison.

The rain was starting to pour when Noah got in his pickup. By the time he pulled onto the driveway, large droplets were assaulting his windshield and the road like locusts. He would have to put the truck's speedometer past its usual 50 in order to make it.

He worried about Jaime, had even managed to save a corner of his mind to worry during his lovemaking with Raylene, and he wasn't going to let a little bad weather stop him from seeing his girlfriend when she needed him most. He still loved her. That was why he was going to break up with her as soon as she got better. She deserved to be happy.

On the radio, the weatherman said a flash flood warning was in effect till three this afternoon. A car swerved in front of him, nearly sending him off the road.

"You fuckin' jerk," he yelled. Then he flicked on his headlights.

7:51 his watch said.

"Please get me there," he whispered to the car as he dodged some more traffic.

*God help me, I still love her.*

\* \* \* \* \*

A fresh-faced doctor entered the room at 7:57. In his hand, some scissors and a hand mirror.

"Hello, Jaime," he said. "Sleep well?"

"No" was Jaime's flat response, but the doctor just smiled. Jaime looked out the window which was now being pelted by rain. Lightning was so bright, it seemed to flash right next to the building.

"Ready to take off those bandages now?"

Her mother entered the room, face still wet from trying to wash the exhaustion from it. "Yes, she's been waiting all night."

"What about Noah?"

Her mother's eyes went to the ground, steeling up the nerve to tell her daughter some bad news. Jaime seemed to hear it even before it left her mouth, probably because she knew it all along. She held her hand and said, "I doubt Noah is coming, sweetheart. He probably can't make it because of this storm." *Thanks for trying to cover for him, anyway, Mom.*

"How about we get those bandages off, so we can have a look, okay?" The doctor moved forward with the scissors in hand. "Just want to see what we're dealing with here."

Jaime closed her eyes. The doctor cut the first bandage. SNIP. No fireworks or butterflies for Jaime. Just her soul sinking.

\* \* \* \* \*

7:57

Noah was racing to beat the devil out of the parking garage, his tennis shoes making wet smacks on the pavement. He had nearly flattened an elderly couple, smacked into a pregnant woman and had to hurdle over a small child before he even got to the entrance.

Seeing the elevator, he made a beeline. What luck, he thought. No one else is on it.

After entering the elevator and pressing the 4 button, his body stopped to catch its breath while his mind was racing to come up with a believable excuse. He couldn't bear to break her heart.

\* \* \* \* \*

SNIP.

SNIP.

SNIP.

The tape was coming off. Jaime felt ready to leave her skin. The coiled cobra in her stomach was moving up into her throat. Her mother looked expectantly at her.

All the while, she could feel the bandage touching her skin as if every fiber in the bandage clung to it.

"Please God. Please," she whispered. "I'm sorry I'm vain."

SNIP.

Noah.

SNIP.

\* \* \* \* \*

Next week, Noah thought. I'll tell her next week. The elevator steadily crawled to the fourth floor. She should be well into the physical therapy by then, shouldn't she?

*It's not you, Jaime. It's me.*

*This elevator seemed to be taking a long time.*

*I just need something . . .*

*Do I really want to go up there?*

*I just want to tell you that . . . I still hope we can be-*

*Shit, that never works.*

*Tomorrow, maybe. Maybe Raylene's right. Why keep lying to her?*

*Or the day after. She still might . . . and she's so beautiful.*

*Maybe the day after. But definitely next week. If not before.*

*Could I do that to her? Could I really?*

The lights flickered in the elevator.

\* \* \* \* \*



Jaime felt the bandages peel off. The expression of her mother changed from expectation to something Jaime could not identify: horror, relief, gratitude, surprise, or something else. Jaime didn't care. She nearly tore the mirror from the doctor's hands.

"Let me see," she hissed. Would Fate love her? Would Noah? Would she be able to love herself?

Then lightning flashed and everything went dark.

\* \* \* \* \*

The power went out across the hospital. A woman was trapped in an elevator and furiously beating on the door, blubbing how she was claustrophobic. Many of the other patients screamed in blind panic. Babies in the maternity ward cried at the light they had so valiantly fought for. Hospice patients wondered if death had finally come for them and doctors waited anxiously for the emergency generators to kick in, which took a good three minutes.

For Jaime and Noah, the darkness was a blessing. Stopping time. Pulling the plug on the world. A good three minutes of peace and quiet. Some time to discover who they are. They waited in the elevator for time to start again.

A Voodoo Doll Speaks

Please undo the stitches  
On my meager mouth

I am wearing someone else's hair  
Yet am eager for your fingers in it  
I have no heart in me  
No raisin or rat dropping to represent  
Yet I feel it out there  
And you have it  
Somewhere

I pretend the voodoo drums  
Move imaginary blood through my body

Badum  
Badoom  
Badum  
Badoom

Your body glows and gyrates in the firelight

Badum  
Badoom  
Badum  
Badoom

The blood and paint become your skin

Badum  
Badoom  
Badum  
Badoom

How I wish to be the blood on your body, in your body

Yet all that is in my body  
Is stuffing and pins

A pin in my eye  
He is blinded  
A pin in his gut  
He doubles over  
A pin where my heart would be  
He feels as you felt

How my indistinct hands would hold you  
How my stitched mouth would kiss you  
How my cloth body would keep you warm  
If you and the Loa would allow it

But I await the next pin from your loving hands  
So that I may kill the bastard for you.

### Eating at the *Diablo Hambre*

I'm sorry, sir. Do you have a reservation?

**Love the food here. It is simply divine.**

It tastes so young and rebellious like James  
Dean in that movie

A bottle of your finest *sangretia*, please

I am still not seeing a reservation

They say by eating this, you gain their  
Strength

You absorb their minds, their hearts,  
Their souls, and you are able to move cars  
With your bare hands.

Please escort the congressman to his  
Table

Are you sure you have a reservation here?

That tie looks like it came from Sears

My wife eats the *puta* fajitas

And it's all she can do to not rip off

My clothes and start fucking me

Right in the restaurant

My baby? Have you seen my baby?

Security, remove this woman

The food is even better here since we were

Married. Remember the girl with pigtails

And an apple in her mouth? Delightful.

<INT. THE RESTAURANT - NIGHT

The guests and restaurant patrons all feel their teeth,  
which have gotten longer and sharper. Some have grown an  
extra row like a shark's>

Is something in my teeth?

Do I need to floss?

I had braces when I was younger

Her smile's her best feature, wouldn't you agree

<The restaurant patrons eat their meals with gusto. Red  
liquid (the wine and /or sauce) cascades down their  
mouths and onto dresses and tuxedos that cost more than  
most yearly incomes>

Delicious

More

Exquisite

More

I feel so ...

More

Alive...

More

**Walter, dear, I think I just climaxed . . .**

Sorry for the mix-up, sir. We found your  
Reservation but you belong in the back.

[to be cont.]

## The boy who was written to—

The boy was born like Cain  
To wander in a field of exposition  
Introducing Mom, Dad, Sissy, Kitten  
And pedophile, Uncle Dave because  
The audience demands realism  
As he grew, he climbed Mount Freytag  
As the uncle's advances grew bolder  
And bolder. No matter who he told  
Dave touched him there. No one believed  
Him. The boy upon reaching the top shot  
Dave's testicle off with a .22 (for Tarantinoesque effect)  
Then shot Dave in the head to stop Dave  
From screaming "I love you" again  
The boy (age 30) tumbled down Mount Freytag  
Thought the juvenile courts and jails  
And various beatings by tougher, less molested boys  
At the bottom of the mountain, the boy decided (?)  
To rob a liquor store. He gets shot because  
The audience demands realism.

## Selling It

*There was only the ring music that echoed in the small gymnasium and in his ears.*

*It came out tinny and indistinct on the gymnasium speakers, but he still felt it in his blood. "Highway to Hell" by AC/DC was the song. The drumbeats seemed to mimic his own heartbeat. He came out wearing just a singlet. No shoulder pads or flowing capes. The sparseness of his wardrobe made Jack feel like a Roman gladiator.*

*Jack Hammer, arms raised high and yelling, had his game face screwed on tight, seeing dozens of hardcore wrestling fans hoot and holler like they were watching a high school basketball game like the one held here last Wednesday.*

*He brought his fists up and down, like he was working a butter churn. It was the signal for the Hammer Down, his finishing maneuver. Afterwards, ever the performer, he pointed at the man in the ring. A man in karate pants and white Kabuki makeup.*

*"That's my title," Jack screamed at the man. The man, Kamikaze Kabuki, spat a mist into the air and then executed a spinning kick. The fans ate it up.*

*He made his way to the ring. He could see the trashcan full of weapons and garden equipment beside the ring. Jack thought back to the razor blade concealed on his person. The promoter demanded a little blood since this was a hardcore match. When the time was right, he would palm the razor and rake it across his forehead. His forehead would bleed profusely. Just like all the other times.*

"Behave yourself, Jack. I want my Daddy to think you're a halfway decent guy," Sammie said. She was a willowy blond and looked delicate as crystal in stark contrast to the big, muscular Jack Hammer.

"Don't worry. He's a fan, isn't he?"

"He is. But he also saw what you did to that announcer last week."

Jack smiled. "What can I say? He pissed me off."

The couple shared a laugh at that, but underneath there was this underlying tension. Like prisoners going down the last mile, like schoolchildren facing the principal, there was this expectancy, this doom. This made the laughter seem too unreal. Both stopped laughing right after they started.

"We're here."

Jack stammered, "Pardon?"

"We're at my parents' house," she said calmly. "Right up that driveway."

Jack looked at the driveway and house she was pointing to and could not contain his awe. However, "damn" was the only word he could muster.

The house was a mansion. A looming brick structure that somehow reminded him of some 1800's Southern charm thanks to the veranda wrapped around the front. The windows were mostly dark and they all seemed large enough to be doors. A balcony loomed over what had to be the front door of the house. To Jack, it was like the jaws of some monster waiting to snap shut.

*How much money do Sammie's folks have?*

Jack pulled up to the house.



Jack could hear Sammie whispering to herself, "I do love my father." Jack moved to touch her hand, but she was already out of the car.

As Jack was getting out of the car, one Jack quietly wished wasn't a beat-up and rusted Cavalier, he saw a woman coming out of the home. She was dressed in a fairly modest gown, one that spoke of money as well as saying "I'm really not for the big dinner parties." Her hair was auburn, dyed and laid straight on her shoulders. Overall, Jack thought she looked like Sammie, except the woman's face looked too angular, like a haphazard carving of Sammie in marble. She looked at Jack briefly and hugged Sammie, barely touching her showed a dislike of physical contact.

"Mother," Sammie said, managing a smile.

"Samantha, dear," her mother replied, smiling back. "How is school going?"

"Mother," Samantha said, breaking the embrace. "I haven't been to school in three months."

"Oh, I am sorry. I just keep forgetting. Wishful thinking, I suppose."

Jack felt like he was fading back into the hills behind him. A hand went to rub the bald pate of his head, a nervous habit he had just acquired after having it shaved off.

"Mother, this is Jack."

The woman smiled. Jack could see she went a little overboard on the makeup.

***Even the Kamikaze Kabuki doesn't use that much.***

Jack smiled. "Pleased to meet you, ma'am."

"Jack, Miriam Colby."

Jack extended his hand. When he gently shook it, Miriam's skin felt vaguely like an old fish's, clammier than Jack's own.

"Do you have a last name, Mr.-"

"Hamlin, ma'am. Everyone else knows me as Jack Hammer."

"Really?" Jack imagined that the woman's nose elevated just ever so slightly, as if suddenly getting a whiff of someone's gas. Her nostrils even seemed to flare.

"You're the pro wrestler, aren't you?"

*Kamikaze started things with a spin kick that looked fairly real. Jack backed up into the ropes, holding his gut. Kamikaze came with a flamboyant series of martial arts chops across Jack's chest. The crowd was screaming for Jack to fight back. Amid the noise, Kamikaze yelled, "Rolling lariat."*

*Jack was whipped into the ropes, then, as Jack was returning, Kamikaze somersaulted toward him. When he got up, Jack executed a clothesline.*

*Jack could hear the audience screaming for him to get up.*

"That's what it says on my tax return." Jack laughed. Miriam didn't. Sammie just looked uncomfortable. They all moved into the house like a funeral procession.

"Sammie, your father's been dying to see you. Why don't you call more?"

"I've been busy moving, mother."

Miriam's eyes traced the contours of Jack's biceps, ready to break free of the sleeves of his dinner jacket. "I bet your friend was most useful in that regard."

Jack, 6'5 and 330, was, for the first time in his life, self-conscious about his muscles. But he even managed a smile of a complacent doorman or gas station

attendant serving this woman. Jack tried to keep his eyes straight ahead to avoid staring. The interior of the house was like a museum exhibit: Jack thought the furniture was beautifully crafted, but the chairs and tables didn't look "homey." The furniture seemed to be made for status rather than function.

"Yes, and for other things too. Jack's really a sweet man." Sammie's voice came out dripping with venom. *God, this is some family.*

"Hmmm" came the mother's reply. "You've known Sammie long, Mr. Hammer?"

"Hamlin, please. I'm off duty. And I've known her for a few months."

"We met after one of his matches," came Sammie's interjection. "I just asked him for a drink after he won that match with—what was his name again?"

"Frederico Frankenstein, dear," Jack said.

"Right. And after that, I became his biggest fan." Sammie's arm snaked around Jack's middle. Jack hugged back, feeling strangely protected. Miriam only nodded. Seemed a little dejected, in fact.

*Jack catches the kick of Kamikaze. He spins him around, grabs him and executes a textbook reverse atomic drop. Kamikaze is thrown into the ropes where he receives a stiff lariat to the back of the head.*

*Members of the crowd stand up, cheering. Jack mutters "press slam" and then Kamikaze is pressed high into the air once, twice, then thrown onto the canvas. Kamikaze overacts, clutching his back. Jack heads over to the garbage can of weapons.*

"Your father is wondering if you fell off the face of the earth. He'll be excited to see you."

The three went into the house. Jack reflexively loosened his tie, trying to get a decent intake of cooling breath.

*A cheese grater across the head and Kamikaze bleeds.*

The dinner was simple enough. Country ham, fried potatoes, soup beans, and even some okra. Sammie told Jack what to expect for dinner. Her father, Nick Colby, was from the deepest valleys in Appalachia, a country boy at heart. And, nowadays especially, he got what he wanted.

Nick was thin, so thin it seemed like the weight of his own head would snap his neck. The man looked like a skeleton wearing a loose-fitting suit of skin. Over that was a suit that looked meant to fit a slightly larger man. From Jack's seat around the massive oak table, he could see the husband and wife and, as he ate, wonder why the two were together. Miriam looked to be in her early forties. The man who was Sammie's father looked old enough to be her grandfather and her mother's father.

Jack remembered asking Sammie how their parents met, just some of the small talk in their early dates. She simply spat out, "He had money, Mom liked money."

"Dinner is excellent," Jack said. It was the first words spoken since everyone sat down to eat. Jack was feeling like he was dining in an Army mess hall.

"Think you'll win?" said Nick, the voice had a sound like rusted cogs moving.

"Pardon?" said Jack.

"Think you'll get the Hardcore title from the Kamikaze Kabuki. He's got that little valet feller."

"Chips have to fall where they may, I guess."

"If you need a manager, Sammie gave you my number, right?"

Sammie smiled. Miriam stabbed at her food with her fork like it was merely sleeping and ready to snatch her fork at a moment's notice. Her eyes moved around the table.

Jack smiled. He couldn't help it. It also calmed his nerves a little. "I'll give you a call if anything comes up." He felt like he could handle anything now.

"All right, then. See it's kinda hard to get Sammie to remember her father 'cause I think she gets a little embarrassed of me."

Sammie swallowed dryly. Jack could see the painful, subtle movements in her throat. "Dad, that's not . . ."

"S'okay. I'm not too eaten up in the head to know that. And I'm glad you came today and brought your friend." He reached his hand across the table and grasped his daughter's hand. "You're both welcome."

"I know, Dad," she said, smiling. "And thank you."

"I'm sure I could get you to a show, Nick," Jack said. "Even take you backstage if you want."

Nick grinned from ear to ear, a kid on Christmas. "That'd be fine. But just between you and me, Jack . . ."

Nick was leaning conspiratorily toward Jack. Jack leaned closer and could smell the death on the man. But the light in his eyes was there, glimmering under the rhuemy film.

"I think that little announcer feller deserved it."

*Off the ropes comes Kamikaze into the massive shoulder of Jack Hammer. Kabuki lay prone on the canvas. Bleeding. Deciding they need to recoup a bit and make a strategy, he wraps powerful arms around Kamikaze's waist in a bear hug while they whisper what to do next.*

*"Time to start winnin'?" asks Kamikaze.*

*Jack only nods.*

*Jack makes like he is squeezing harder and harder. Kamikaze's arms becoming limp until a can opener is raked across Jack's forehead.*

"Jack," Miriam suddenly interrupted, but Nick went on mumbling. Jack was so startled, his jaw unconsciously clenched.

He barely swallowed the potatoes. "Ma'am?"

"I'm just wondering, since you are dating our daughter and we of course want her to have a good life—excuse me for beating around the bush, but I'm just wondering if you plan on being a . . . pro wrestler until you retire."

*Blood gushes from the opening Jack makes after Kamikaze's assault. He is brandishing the can opener and baring his tongue to the crowd.*

Jack smiled, feeling prepared and on sure ground. "Actually, no. My father spent his life wrestling and now he's home with a bad back. I only plan on doing this for a little while. Until I finish my book."

Miriam looked, for a moment, incredulous. Then the mask returned. "Really?"

"He's a great writer," Sammie interjected. "He's even a poet. He's written some really nice poems for me."

Jack saw Sammie wickedly smile in his direction as she looked away from her mother who was turning a side of her mouth downward into a smirk.

"How long will it take you to finish this book and get it published, Jack? Five, ten years?"

The tension got thicker by more than a few degrees. "Hopefully, sooner than that."

*The sweat ran into the cut. Jack hated that. And some of the blood was running into his eyes, blinding him.*

*Kamikaze cracks a hollow kendo stick over his back. Jack obediently falls. His eyes are adjusting as Kamikaze gives a slashing motion across his throat.*

"He's gonna make it," came Sammy. "He really is good."

Miriam continued. "Can you wrestle for a long time, Jack? I hear the literary circle is a rather elitist group."

Jack felt his face flush. He counted backwards in his head even as he answered, "I'm sure that someone will eventually—"

*Kamikaze Kabuki flips backwards off the top turnbuckle.*

"Ah yes, eventually." Miriam looked ready to gloat and Jack could have kicked himself. "That's a tricky word there. Eventually could mean tomorrow, next year, or even a decade down the road perhaps."

Jack felt his hands bunch into fist as he does when he gives guys the Hammer Down. However, this time, he wanted to smash this table . . . or Miriam's face. He could imagine it making a wet smack like hitting clay.

*Kabuki connects with the moonsault on Jack. Jack feigns the impact that looked real enough to crack his ribs.*

*1 . . . 2 . . .*

"Maybe a larger federation will hire me until I can get my book published—"

"What kind of book is it?"

"Spy thriller," Jack said. The dialogue was now like a tennis match. Jack could feel the warm air roaring through his nostrils. Sammie stabbed angrily at a fried potato, looking all the time at Nick who was staring off into space.

"Interesting. How many of those writers are trying to sell—"

"Mine's also a romance. Not a thing to do with Ian Fleming."

"That should really help its chances—"

"Shut up, mother."

*Jack's manager runs in, a guy dressed like a biker, interrupting the count.*

*He's wrapping a chain around his fist while climbing the ring steps.*



The room fell silent. Jack couldn't believe the sheer audacity of Mrs. Nick Colby, verbally tearing her daughter's friend in the middle of a family dinner. Miriam was slightly flabbergasted at her daughter's outburst, eyes wide in shock yet mouth curled into a scowl. Nick was calmly eating, his mouth moving even when he wasn't chewing.

"I'm sorry," Miriam said at last. "I just figured you finally wanted some kind of financial security. All of your last boyfriends have jobs behind counters, am I right?"

*The manager, Shiv, entered the ring. Kamikaze turns to face him. Shiv stops. Mexican stand-off.*

"We have dreams, mother." Sammie used the word "mother" like it was the most volatile blasphemy. "Which is more than what I can say for you."

"Dreams which amounted to nothing."

Sammie scraped her fork across her plate. "And how's your dream of marrying money and sitting on your ass?"

*Shiv charges, rearing his fist back into a haymaker.*

Now Miriam's teeth were showing, bared like a snarling mongrel. Her lacquered nails seemed to be trying to claw through the oak table. Then she smiled and turned to Jack.

*Kamikaze ducks and lays out Shiv with a sidekick. He is unraveling the chain around Shiv's fist.*

"How does it feel to be a weapon, Jack? She does this all the time. Finds a man I am sure to absolutely detest, then bring him over here so I can become horrified and ashamed. How does it feel to be the latest one?"

Jack was on the verge of answering, clasping a fork in his hand when Sammie blurted out, "You're wrong, mother, because I want to marry him."

*The chain is now wrapped around the fist of Kamikaze who gives a lowblow to Jack. Jack, doing everything to express pain except cross his eyes comically, looks to be a sitting duck.*

Jack's anger was momentarily forgotten as he now stood up from the chair, thunderstruck. They had discussed marriage halfheartedly, but there had never been a proposal. Both, Jack thought, decided that neither was ready. Then the other bombshell.

"I might be carrying Jack's baby for all you know."

*Kamikaze apparently goes into a mini-kata, building force. He lets out a karate yell and . . .*

Miriam was looking away from her daughter, into the hallway. Her eyes looked empty as a doll's. "Then I hope you like the welfare line, dear."

Nick muttered, "Where am I?"

*Jack kicks Kamikaze in the crotch. Kamikaze, not faking, actually whistled. Jack is told later that he almost got him before he sincerely apologizes.*

Sammie stormed out of the house.

*Off the ropes, quick signal to the crowd . . .*

Jack got up, wiped his mouth and said, "Dinner was great, I'll send you and autographed picture, Nick, and you"-to Miriam-"should really stop being a bitch just because your life turned out to be shit. Good night." As he went outside, Jack couldn't help but smile. He made a mental note to remember that line.

*The Hammer Down on the back of Kamikaze's neck. 1 . . . 2 . . .*

Jack left the house, following Sammie. Nick was muttering again and Miriam was screaming for the nurse.

*3!!!!!! The crowd goes wild. "Highway to Hell" fires up again.*

Jack found Sammie outside, breathing heavily and leaning out over the veranda as though throwing up. When she saw him, she immediately rushed over to him, repeating the words "I'm sorry, I'm sorry" till they ran together and formed gibberish.

With Sammie still clinging to him, Jack asked, "Sammie, what was that all about?"

"My mother's just awful. She's just so cheated. Poor fucking—"

"I mean about us getting married, and you pregnant. You just had your period, didn't you?"

"I know. I did. She just makes me crazy sometimes. I just want her to stop being so mad at everyone."

"Forget her." Jack said the words with conviction.

*Shiv raises Jack's hand. In Jack's other hand was the Hardcore belt. In Shiv's other hand was a pair of brass knuckles he got from his pocket.*

"I know I should, but Daddy—he won't be around for long and mother's killing him."

Just then, Jack wished he wrote romance instead of spy fiction. Instead, he just led her to the car. Jack turned back to look at the house, then, thinking oddly of Lot's wife, hurriedly looked straight ahead. *What kind of family would I be marrying into if I decided to marry her?*

*Shiv nails Jack. Jack fell backward. The crowd suddenly started booing. Just then, the Phreaky Sheik, the no. 2 contender for the Hardcore belt came into the ring screaming. He soon had Jack in the Camel Clutch while Shiv kicked him repeatedly.*

\* \* \* \* \*

After the match, in the locker room, Jack was in his street clothes, sitting with his massive shoulders hunched over a small Polaroid. He was staring at a letter in one hand, then the photograph in the other. Back and forth. Back and forth, he looked at them both.

Kamikaze and Phreaky Sheik were laughing at something, a joke involving a penguin in a repair shop, as they walk past Jack. They are out of their gear and the Sheik even lets his Tennessee twang emerge in a guffaw.

"Y'wanna get a beer with us, Jack?"

"Later, guys."

Kamikaze speaks up. "Look, man. Just forget her. She screwed you like she probably did a lot of other guys."

Jack almost looked up from the picture, taking offense to Kamikaze's statement until he realized he was right, just like that bitch Miriam was.

"C'mon," Kamikaze was saying. "Night out before we leave will do you good."

Jack looks up at them. Smiles reassuringly. "Meet you at the bar."

"See you then, buddy," says the Sheik and they both leave.

The letter is from Sammie. Talking about her new boyfriend, a drummer with hair down to his asshole. She's going to the Community College and is learning how to be a medical transcriptionist. She also says Nick passed away, more of a footnote. No sign of Miriam in the letter.

In the picture, it's the same Sammie. Only happier and looking to be about seven months pregnant. She's standing outside a club in the daytime with a dirty-looking rail of a man who must be her boyfriend.

She didn't mention the dinner with her folks, about seven months ago.

Jack could only shake his head, thinking of fate and destiny, God creating an individual story for every soul breathing, stories no one would believe if they could read them.

"Thank God wrestling's simple to understand."

He puts the picture in his duffel, throws the letter away, and heads out the door.

At the Jehosophat Valley Day Care

Dear Mommy,  
School is going well today  
STOP IT!  
I made  
STOP TOUCHING ME!  
A heart  
PLEEEAAAAASE!!!!!!!  
Of clay today  
Stopitstopitstopitstopitstopitstopitstopit!!!!

Wave hi to the nice man in the dirty yellow van  
What are we playing today, Mrs. B?  
Are we playing with the dolls today?  
Arewearewearewearewearewe?!?!?!?

The mobile on the ceiling is our solar system slightly  
askew  
My Very Elderly Mother Just Served Us Nine Pizzas

Hello, Dolly Mommy  
Dolls?  
Hello, Dolly Daddy  
Dolls are stupid  
"Where's dinner, Dolly Mommy?"  
And they're ugly  
Don't make Dolly Daddy mad  
His dolly fists fly when he's mad

I spilled my red Kool-Aid  
See how red the carpet is, Mrs. B?  
Red  
Red  
Red

I get to be the general today  
But you got to be the general yesterday  
And I get to be the general again today  
And I'm sending you all on the front line to die

Always listen to a policeman, children  
They're here to protect us  
Take that, you dirty crook

And that  
And that  
And th-STOP CRYING!!!!

Mrs. B, my undies are wet  
I couldn't hold it in any longer

Red  
Red  
Red everywhere

Did you break yours off?  
Daddy said Freud said you've always wanted one of these  
So get your own  
*Janey said mine's the biggest one she's ever seen*

See what the nice man in the dirty yellow van brought for  
Show and Tell? One at a time, Children. You'll all get to  
touch it

You gotta kill a lot more people before  
You can die a hero, soldier  
So stop crying  
Stop bleeding  
Stop wanting your Mommy

Teach you to disobey my authority, you dirty crook  
You're going to jail. *Hold onto your soap.*

Mrs. B, I had an accident  
My underwear's all red  
Red  
Red  
Red  
Red

Why'd you hit him, Tony?  
I wanted his shoes  
I wanted his girlfriend

Mrs. B, what's gender confusion?

You're going to jail  
You ain't got no rights

Who put these bruises on my Dolly Mommy?  
Did Dolly Daddy do this?  
Well . . .  
You shouldn't have been late with his dinner.

Mrs. B, my tummy hurts  
That's because there's a baby in it, dear

Daddy said you broke yours off 'cause you couldn't handle it  
Mommy said you use yours to beat women to pieces

Red  
Red  
Red  
Red

Mrs. B. my tummy-  
I got the badge and I got the authority

Red  
Red  
Red

You do as I say  
It hurts

Red  
Red  
Red

I got the stripes on my uniform  
You do as I say

Red  
Red  
Can you-ooooowwwwwww!!!!  
Make it stop!!!!

My fists are bigger than yours



You do as I say

Red  
Red  
Red  
Red

**MAKE IT STOP!!!!**

Red  
Red  
Red  
Black

Oooooowwwwwwwwwww!!!!!!

<A baby crying>

Class, I'd like you to meet a new playmate today . .

A Speech on the *Splatterpunk* . . .

Ladies and Gentleman  
Fuckups of all ages  
Prepare to get your fingers wet

First, breathe the ruddy droplets  
Issuing from your nose and know  
The copper you're wired with

Muscles are a group of interconnecting fibers  
That can be severed nice  
Like a splice of film  
On the cutting room floor  
Of the baby boomer generation

Know that there is religion in the gratuitous nude scene  
Bigger than the bra size, bigger than the orgasm  
Remember. Follow, follow, follow me on this

Never have your dying actors scream *a cappella*  
Have them scream to the *SNIKT*ing and slicing of sinew  
It's what sells. Blood is gold in them Hollywood hills, glittering visceral

What's your favorite scary movie?  
What book did you fear putting down for fear  
Of being dragged under the bed and violated  
By a monster (usually male) of unknown size  
(usually male)  
But able to rip off your arms?  
(It has a PENIS!)

What is death in cinema but  
Sex to a sadist or a convention goer  
Who's never kissed a girl?  
A cinematic secret:  
The knife is dull  
But can be made to squirt blood  
Thanks to some tubing on the side facing away from the camera  
See?  
SEE?!?!?!  
The knife ejaculates blood

Janet Lee's womb was sliced open by a walking Oedipal complex  
**See the signs, people!**

Watch the news  
For inspiration  
Death  
Blood  
Necrogasmic masturbation  
*HDTV. The reds are redder.*

Look into the guts  
Of a stoned teenager  
Wind the intestines around your hand  
Like spaghetti on a fork  
Forget about finding the heart. It doesn't exist

Remember the caress of a razored glove  
Four canyons carved in your backside  
Your demons need air

Yes, you  
And you  
And you  
And you  
And you  
Demons making you sorry  
You thought your nasty thoughts  
Hate mother  
Hate father  
Hate school  
Love me and my movies  
Hate life  
Love me  
Hate everything your bile sticks to

Remember all your pain  
So they will never forget  
(I'm sorry but . . .)  
Paint of picture in reds and creamy whites  
(this is what I get for loving her)  
Paint on paper  
(Yes, I still love her)  
Paint on celluloid

(God, I really love her)  
Paint on the back of everyone's eyelids

The camera should be your blackened eye  
The script; the story, a fangtasmagorical garden of Eden  
Now commence cutting yourself, fill the pen  
Write

INT. LITTLE JOHNNY'S NURSERY - NIGHT

The well-endowed babysitter has just put the baby in for  
the night . . . .

Venus DeMilo's a hot piece of ass . . .

Man, check out the neck on that Venus  
Dig those classical lines on her hourglass  
I hear she's a pretty nutty chick, though  
Word?  
Woman cut off her arm's cause she didn't  
Want to touch men anymore  
That's whack, Man  
Then she dipped herself in liquid marble  
Filled up all her holes  
Can't smell (sweaty men)  
Can't taste (lying tongues, pickled in cheap wine)  
Can't see (the leering, stubbled faces)  
Pygmalion even tried to fuck her between her toes  
Damn, she's crazy.  
But she's hot  
Be even hotter if she'd smile a little more . . .

### The Benefits of Genre Fiction

Angela went down the dark hallway, flashlight clutched in her hand. The beam of light jittered with the trembling of her hands. She pulled the letterman's jacket tighter around her frame. Her teeth ground together whenever a footstep made a creak on the ancient floor. Angela took tiny steps through the hall, wishing that the electricity was still on so that the shadows that surrounded her would seem less looming and ghostly.

"Edith, you ready yet?"

Edith moved her hands off the computer keys and threw them in the air with disgust. The words were really coming until her mother called.

"In a sec, Mom," she called down. Edith was already in a black dress, hair combed, no makeup. She figured Mom would try to force her to wear some makeup, but Edith had already decided she would steadfastly refuse. Besides, Mom coats it on a little too thick anyway.

Fish danced across the screen, the screen saver. Edith moved the mouse and continued, awaiting the force that called her to write this story in the first place. She scratched her leg absently, cursing the pantyhose she had to wear for the funeral. She remembered the phone call that told her Uncle Eddie was dead, something about his heart giving out while watching television. Her aunt had found him dead in an overstuffed chair, dead to the world, as Alex Trebek looked on from his home in the television.

Her English teacher, Mr. Ellison, loved to talk about the muse and inspiration, how it was something angelic. Edith sometimes thought of inspiration as a bug in her head, a churning, chittering something that demanded release. Just thinking of Uncle Eddie had made her skin crawl, brought back the smell of sweat and something like beef jerky to her nose.

A bat flittered across Angela's path, shrieking horribly. She jumped and had to stifle a scream. The beam of the flashlight danced across the wall with her movements. God, how she wished her boyfriend was here . . .

*Scratch that.*

How she wished her best friend April was here.

It was just a dare, Angela thought. Just a stupid little dare that meant she did or did not get into the sorority. Go into the bedroom and see if old man Habersham really did like to walk about late at night and then leave. Why did they have to be so mean about it? All she wanted was to get involved in a college extracurricular activity.

A clammy finger seemed to caress her neck, but . . .

"Hey, sis," came Edith's brother, Jake. He was wearing a suit and his tie was all askew due to his constant pulling at it.

"Hey, twerp. Can't you remember the rules?"

"Rules?"

"Yeah, like thou shalt have no idiot brothers interrupt me when I'm writing."

He tossed a book at him, a Stephen King paperback, and he dodged it easily.

“Lighten up, Edith. I just wanted to borrow a book for my book report.”

Edith fingers itched at the keyboard. The twittering thing had wandered somewhere else in the back of her head. “Try the one on the floor, dufus.”

Jake picked up the book like it was a dead animal. “I don’t think I should use any of your weirdo books. The teacher might think I’m crazy or something.”

“She’d be on the right track,” Edith retorted.

*Nobody knows you like I do.*

The dry heave of a memory made her shiver with revulsion.

“Edith honey, are you ready yet?” came her mother’s bellow from somewhere in the house. Edith wondered if Lovecraft ever had any of his aunts bother him like this.

“I’m ready.” The word “ready” came out like “reaaaaadeeeeee,” showing adolescent annoyance. It was times like this that she wished to be totally alone, hidden in the shadows where no one could disturb her writing.

*“Got a minute, Kiddo?”*

*“No, I’m busy right now, Uncle Eddie.”*

*“C’m on, Kiddo. I haven’t seen you in a while. We can just talk.”*

The memory felt like a clammy hand on her shoulder. Her fingers trembled like the strings on a guitar. Edith was suddenly startled out of her flashback by her mother’s voice.

“Watch Jake for a minute, sweetheart. I have to go pick up your Aunt Bernice.”



Edith nearly cursed, but held it in because Jake was in the room. Not because he would inform Mom, but because he would annoyingly sing how Edith said a bad word and even moved his head in metronome time to his discordant voice. Edith's mouth was dry as she remembered the word, "Kiddo," coming from her uncle's livery lips.

"Mom, can't he watch himself?"

"Yeah, mom," said Jake. "I'm almost twelve. I can take care of myself."

Edith could practically feel the sigh coming from her mother; it matched the one she herself was issuing. This story was due tomorrow and Edith could feel the story throbbing in her head. She slipped some spearmint gum into her mouth to take care of the copper taste in it and took a deep breath to calm herself.

"Just watch him till I get back. I won't be gone too long." The door slamming shut. Mom was out the door. The station wagon could be heard starting up and backing out of the driveway. Edith turned and saw her brother leaning on her doorway. She suddenly switched off the monitor.

"Can you go into the room and watch T.V.?" Edith said to her brother.

"Yeah, but what about dinner? I'm starving."

"We'll get some food at the funeral," Edith said, now actually feeling a little ill at the thought of not writing. She felt ready to vomit, but her fingers practically felt electrified. They needed to be back on the keyboard. "Now go watch 'Gilligan's Island.' It's on channel 15."

Jake left the room and took the book with him. Probably get it dirty, she thought.

The door looked eaten in places. Angela thought it was termites at first, but soon realized it was bullet holes. Bullet holes that looked like she could put her finger through them. All she had to do was open the door, grab some knickknack from the nightstand and then she could leave. The air in this place seemed ready to choke her the more she breathed it. She felt like an anvil was sitting on her chest and her lips were cracked.

All she needed was to open the door and peer inside. Grab something and then leave. Get a lamp or anything and then get out of there. Just one little item and then leave.

Oh God, how she wanted to leave.

*"C'mon, Kiddo. You can tell your Uncle Eddie what's wrong."*

*"I don't want to. I mean it's nothing, really. Why are you sitting so close to me?"*

*"Just want to talk with you. That's all."*

Edith checked her hands. The palms had a slight sheen of sweat. Her fingers seemed to vibrate on her hands. She burped out loud, releasing some of the tension that had settled in her stomach. She put a hand to her mouth and realized she nearly spit her gum out onto the screen.

*Let's get writing,* she thought. Then came the voice of Uncle Eddie. *"I think it's great that you write,"* he said. *"Some of my favorite people are writers."*

A door downstairs was opening. She could hear the din of her mother's voice and a soft blubbing, probably her Aunt Bernice. Not much time.

Angela grasped the doorknob and flung wide the door. She nearly screamed at the unearthly creaking the hinges made. *How long has that door remained closed?* she thought.

*"I know you pretty well, Kiddo. You can tell me anything."*

The master bedroom was covered in a sheet of dust. Under the dust, everything was covered in those grimy sheets that keep the dust off of the fine furniture. Light from the streetlamp outside provided some illumination, but there were still areas of the room that looked like sections of black cardboard.

"Edith, honey. Time to get ready."

Her mom was home. Edith heard a soft sobbing from downstairs. Must be Aunt Bernice. Edith had seen her aunt a few times. She was a birdish woman that seemed to flutter around Edith with offers of lemonade and girl talk. When Eddie was around, Edith saw her aunt hug him like he was a porcupine.

*"You like your Uncle Eddie, don't you?"*

*"I think Mom wants me."*

*"Your mom's at the store. She left me to take care of you."*

*"Please don't do that."*

"Just let me get through this," Edith whispered. "Just let me get through this."

*Damn*, Angela thought. Nothing to steal from off the table. She tapped the flashlight against her hand, thinking of what to do next.

Then she saw the antique bed with the bedposts that looked like they could be removed.

She went over slowly, hearing every small creek in the boards, and started to unscrew the tops of the bedposts, eagles with talons fastened to the woodwork.

Jake was running down the hall as fast as he could, as if he was in the Indy 500 without a car. "You comin', Edith?" he screamed into her room before bolting down the stairs.

*"What's your favorite movie? We can go and rent it."*

*"I don't feel like watching—What are you doing?"*

She had the thing entirely off when something moved from underneath the sheet. Someone was under there. Angela didn't see anyone under there when she came in. The bed looked as flat as a carving board. Now there was a definite man shape under it. A rather large man with a belly. Angela was reminded of the small hill outside her house.

Angela's breath caught in her throat as she retreated. She could see the thing in the bed move. Small stains were now dotting the sheet, reddish stains that grew wider as she watched. The thing under the bed was getting up.

*"Why are you touching me there? Stop it."*

*"I'm just showing my affection for you, Edith. That's all."*

*"Please don't do that."*

*"It's okay, sweetie."*

Angela went for the door, but it suddenly shut. The knob would not even turn.

"Edith, you ready yet?" Mother's feet were on the stairs, climbing them quickly.

The sheet was off the man, revealing a meaty pulp of a face. The bullet holes pumped out more blood, staining the man's three-piece suit. His hands were green with red streaks on them. They reached for her. Angela saw the hamburger face of Eddie Habersham attempt a lecherous smile.

*"You love your Uncle Eddie, don't you?"*

*"Please don't do that-"*

*"Oh yes, you do love him."*

*"No, stop it . . ."*

"Edith, we've got to go." From another bedroom. Edith couldn't hear her mother's feet.

Angela couldn't move. She could only stare as the thing came closer. Could only stand still as one hand caressed her sweater and the other went up her skirt.

Suddenly the screen went blank. Dead. Edith could only stare in shock.

"No. No, Goddammit, no!" she whispered. No scene where the evil pervert would die by a knife found on the nightstand. No death scene. No dead Ernie.

"Come on, honey. We have to go. We don't want to be late for your Uncle Ernie's funeral. The power should be on when you get back."

Edith was shaking badly. How could she go to his funeral? Edith couldn't move from her chair. The sheer disappointment, the frustration, and the fear seemed to crystallize in her muscles. She couldn't go to the funeral now, see his jowled face, the livery lips that touched her skin and made it feel like a stranger's skin, tight and clammy.

Inside Edith Thomas, Eddie Halleran was still alive. Edith bit her lip as two tears rolled down her face. Edith turned away from the dead screen and saw her mother in the doorway.

"What's the matter, Edith?"

## Falling

Grasping  
 Holding onto lovehandles  
 Saw a face in a mirrored ceiling

Roses in reverse  
 My galaxy irises shut.

Did you see the crooked man  
 with a crooked needle in his arm?  
 [he offered me and the other kids candy and more]

Hands are touching with first-time jitters

{AAAAAAWHOOOOOOO!!!!!!}  
 The Larry Talbot in me hungers  
 I smell the air and skin electric  
 My teeth reek with the reddish copper

Walking on the streets with no signs  
 The cops here are blind  
 And the nuns walking poodles have  
 Weeping sores  
 We don't have no lingo anymore

A demon demands a skylight in my head  
 I oblige the man

My blowhole lets me breathe underwater  
 And commune with my spineless brothers  
 and sisters (let's share the love)

Climb the banyan tree  
 Do we follow the cobra  
 Into its hole?  
 (Yes, because we so love the poison)

Words are corded muscle  
 Teeth  
 Nails  
 Smells  
 Bones  
 Prometheus pours a cup of brimstone

I perceive the social message of  
 Springer  
 Pro Wrestling contains the teachings  
 Of Sun Tsu

Persephone sells herself to Johns

(Barely out of Hell a day—and  
she already needs love)

She vows me with visions of  
Thigh-high  
Minis  
Roses  
Lipstick  
Waterfall  
Perfume mist  
Flesh  
Earth  
(why didn't I see the connections before . . . )

Why am I not so happy now that I'm a demigod?  
Is it me or does this ambrosia taste funny?

Crackhead baby in a fetal position  
Willing a womb for itself

A soccer mom wills her hand  
To open the Prozac bottle  
A vacuum awaits her medicinal rebirth in the  
herenowwhenwherewhy  
Or whatever

Palimpincest  
Psyche fucks self  
Into an origamiasmic collapse

Beatles sing of love  
Worms of death  
So a hairy grave told me  
When I dreamed myself dead one sunny afternoon

Savatar grants me passage  
On the Sissyphan mountainside

Hurry up, please  
The subway's leaving  
And the Kármic Wheel is lovely this time of year

Persephone douches with Lethean brine  
And she can't get my filth from off her  
mind (my itching fingers  
like old blues singers  
crooning in the mists)

This fortune cookie simply says  
ENDSVILLE!



My hands grow ever webbed  
I'm a fruit in a larger Tree of Knowledge  
My seed doesn't itch  
I spit the seed and forget all THIS SHIT

Tiny heart, dynamo hum  
Amniocentric  
Spiritual fireworks

Derived in a sensory deprivation tank . . . .

What does time taste like?  
Which area of my tongue  
Does it live with its Mother Nature-In-Law?  
Sweet, salty, sour, bitter, ephemeral?

The Peruvian Devil Testicle Pepper  
is said to make men pray for death  
upon consumption—Do they  
really need a pepper to tell them when they  
Have a perfectly good death instinct  
Water flows  
A poet knows  
A toucan's nose(beak)  
FREAK!!!!

Perhaps I'm making up what I breathe  
As I go along

Would someone please depress the plunger  
So I can make my date  
With the lady of the red dress and  
Third eye—  
she will only date *real* men, you see. Men with Gene Simmons tongues.

I asked the perfume lady behind  
The makeup counter for a smell  
That will make the dog play with me

Setting sun  
Cotton candy clouds  
Blather, Rinse, Repeat  
I'm crying and thinking I'll never express my pain well enough

Damn . . . .

The curve of a wine goblet  
mimics the curve of a stripper's  
Silicone endowments  
(I smell grapes on the sweaty singles)

Fingers must flex awake—work with me here!

A Buddhist monk spiraling from Nirvana  
Went for some ice cream to drown his sorrows  
The distinctive sound of jabbering between spoonfuls of Rocky Road

Must every poem published mention fucking?

Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuck

Yes, now that was a dumb question

Must every housewife mutilated on my 18-inch screen  
Get her 15 min. because  
Dinner didn't come fast enough?

*I read this on a pack of bubble gum. Be patient with me.*  
Where does mourning Ra go  
When the eclipse comes?

Ans: The loony bin

Did God make thorazine for martyrs?  
I'd ask him, but he's weaving some baskets  
So says my Reader's Digest, so let it be until my television says different

Books are such a tease  
Reading Rainbow lied to me  
The words are whores selling their  
carnavalesque wares and STDs  
That burn the blood with no relief

Behold, I, Oedipus, am chained  
to a mountain  
I, Oedipus, must slay my father who is remembered by my five senses  
I, Oedipus, know the answer  
for all the good it does me

Dripping  
Falling sand  
Pineal gland  
grows fat and cancerous  
on my constipated notions

The Gordian knot on my spinal column  
awaits, sweating  
My kingdom for a guillotine or a beefy executioner  
I must stop sensing!

Orpheus has his legs broken  
at the 5<sup>th</sup> level  
Fingers broken, level 3  
Castrated at 2<sup>nd</sup>  
Rejected by his first choice school  
sometime today

And today

And today

And today  
Hell is repetition  
Yet closure

I remember the stitches in the lids  
The ball gag reeking of coal dust  
I'd make a great quadruple amputee, wouldn't I?

Someone? . . . . .*echo*

[*fin?*]

## Behold the Magic 8 Ball

A little boy watches  
The black blood of his magic 8 ball  
Spill in the street

Reds cap askew, his third eye  
Seals over, sewn shut

<Ask me again later>

A man entombed in a shirt and tie  
Releases  
With each welt he makes in the hooker's ass  
He loses a small fortune on the horse races tomorrow

<Outlook not so good>

Lay down your tired heads, lost boys  
On a field of tombhair  
Since you're blind, I can describe the sunrise

<Answer is unclear>

Look  
Beyond the hill  
Like a gigantic tanning bulb  
Incinerating the sky fluorescently

<All signs point to . . . sunshine!>

Whatever happened to the old woman  
Who spoke in tongues and cut herself repeatedly?

The cat swings like a pendulum  
Before the boy takes aim  
A pellet is fired. Animal scream  
Then . . . (horrifying stillness)

FLASH!  
Huge cave-in. Miners are trapped  
A miner takes his first tentative bite out of his dead  
Friend's shoulder

Pound of flesh=\$5.00 won at poker game at best friend's house  
 The eye's next, old son  
 Eat the eyes

<Definitely Yes>

Find the fold in the soul  
 Of the welfare mother of three  
 If folded into a bird origami-style  
 Perhaps she'll fly away . . . or walk away

<All signs point to yes (I guess)>

I threw a baby blanket in a dumpster  
 So the baby that will eventually be thrown there  
 Will be warm (think of a child's smile)

I'm forgetting my place again, aren't I?

A Goth poet  
 Tentatively tries to break the barrier  
 With florid purple prose  
*TURN THE HOSE ON HIM!*  
 He deserves it for sucking at poetry

<Definitely not(?)>

A man touches a hot stove  
 And touches . . .  
 And touches . . .  
 And touches . . .  
 Till the skin is wet wallpaper

A god, perhaps yours,  
 Narrowly avoids getting his hand caught  
 In the gears of the clockwork universe

Seeing  
 Smelling  
 Tasting  
 Touching  
 Hearing  
 Fucking

Fucking

Fucking

FUCK!!!!

NOTHING MAKES SENSE

<Outlook not so good>

### Dooby Learns a Lesson

You like that girl talking with her friends, don't you?

Yeah, I can see it in your eyes. All that teenage lust feeling like it's about to eat you up inside. I may be old, but I still remember it. Can't find a man alive who doesn't. And she is a pretty little thing too. Let me guess, she's probably a cheerleader, maybe gets good grades and she might not be dating anybody on the football team so you think you might actually have a chance.

Me? I'm just a guy who's lived is all. Seen stuff like this happen all the time, lived a lot of it. Got a minute?

Sure you do. She's not going anywhere. How about I tell you a little story? Might give you a little context to put this puppy love into. Pays to listen to your elders, after all. This story I'm telling you may not be true. I heard it from some guy up North I think back when I was just a wandering writer hungry for experience. I eventually made it into a story and I think you'd like it. I sold a couple of stories, so I think I can tell it to do it justice.

R. B. "Dooby" Radlin was a man twice cursed by life or whatever engineer sent this world spinning. Dooby Radlin was not a mean man. He was not bitter about the cards Fate dealt him, even though it were a terrible hand indeed. Dooby would not allow his nature to be what his Dad called "corrupting" him.

That was Dooby's strength, you see. Dooby was the nicest and gentlest of men. He loved animals. He liked to watch the children run and play in the summertime in the lot by his house that his window let him see. He could sit for hours



on his porch and look at the sky during those beautiful, sunny days and just think how beautiful the blue was. He thought that the clouds looked like particular things such as tables, race cars, birds and dogs. Dooby thought that some of the clouds looked like people he knew, but he would never, ever think anything bad about them.

However, many people did not understand this side to Dooby's nature. The people in his town thought of Dooby as slow. He was always in the special classes in school until his father decided one day to pull him out. He had earned the name Dooby when some kids older than Dooby was at the time said he looked "stoned."

It wasn't soon after his Dad took him out of school that his mother had snapped and burned Dooby's face on a stove. Half of Dooby's face looked like wax melted off a candle and he didn't have any ear to speak of. After that, his mother went away to an institution and he never saw her again. Dooby still lives with his Papaw who still preaches about "hellfire" even though his father worked in a refinery and Dooby always touches the burnt part of his face when his Pappy mentions "hellfire."

Dooby liked watching the people walking around, especially the children before and after school. Dooby would watch all the children walking to school wearing their dresses and jeans and shirts with pretty logos, wearing their backpacks in a variety of colors and some even looking like animals.

The children chatted and laughed so loud that Doobie wanted to go near them and join in. He wanted to talk with them too about books and T.V. shows he had seen and maybe even talk about woodworking, one of his favorite hobbies. But Dooby was scared. Dooby had seen the movie, "Frankenstein," and Dooby remembered the

villagers chasing the monster with torches and pitchforks just because the monster had a flat head and bolts in his neck. Dooby would often touch his face when seeing the children chat and laugh like his face itched but it didn't really. His hand went up there like it was a separate creature. Dooby wouldn't realize his hand was up there until he felt its fingers scratching and the rock formed in his stomach.

I'm a writer and I'm embellishing the story. Haven't you heard of embellishing?

One day, he saw a girl walking outside going home from school. She was pretty with long red hair and went to the high school downtown. She looked like a woman with a curvy figure yet her face was sweet and innocent. Dooby looked into her eyes and didn't see a lot of the sadness and solemnity he saw in others. She was walking with a little boy who had the same kind of red hair as she did and he also had a spray of freckles across his nose and cheeks. She never walked with a boy from the high school. Always with her little brother.

Dooby became excited because he had found the love of his life.

Unfortunately, Dooby was not really what anyone—whether they be a psychologist or a wannabe minister like his father—would call an expert on love. Dooby's only real contact with the outside world came through his television. Dooby's father disapproved of television in general because he thought many of the programs to be "onery" and "sinful." However, putting Dooby in front of the television for hours on end was one way to ensure that he would not have to watch his

son. So it was that Dooby, reading at only a third-grade level, received most of his education from television.

Most of Dooby's education about dating and relationships came from the soap operas. Before the red-headed girl came home from school, Dooby would sit and watch three hours of soap operas where the women were always looking hungrily into the man's eyes and then—to poor Dooby, mind you—kissed like they were wrestling with their lips. They'd fall this way and that and then land on the bed where the festivities would start. Dooby was a sensitive guy and he would have loved a woman with all his naïve, little heart, but he never could get the subtle nuances of courting. That, his face and his general lack of sparkling conversation meant that the odds were against Dooby finding true love.

When Dooby would practice in front of the mirror, his father would usually come home from work, sweat clinging to his face and overalls and ask "What you doin', idiot?" Dooby would be caught puckering, the leer of his face squished like some wadded-up paper, and attempt to look down at the floor. This only made his father madder at him.

"Did you read your Bible today, Dooby?" His father, like the other townspeople, always called him "Dooby." This was mostly because the R in R. B. stood for Rufus, his grandfather's name, and the B for Bailey, the middle name of Dooby's father.

Give a writer a break, Kid. It's my story, and I should feel free to elaborate on it should I feel the need. Sit down and relax. Order another Coke. The apple of your eye's not leaving just yet.

Anyway, Dooby just nodded. He always read his Bible, especially the red words which were supposedly Jesus' own words. However, his father never quizzed him on what he read because that would mean dealing with his son. "Good," said his Dad. "Go sweep off the porch and don't be making any of those crazy faces. Unless you want to go up to the crazy bin with your Ma."

Dooby always touched the burned side of his face whenever his Papaw mentioned his Ma. He did so then and immediately went out to sweep off the walk.

Dooby was a little naïve about the aspects of romance and where to get help, but he was unable to ask his father because he would always tell Dooby he shouldn't breed (Something about the lord's work and all that). But Dooby at least had one good idea about how to go about wooing her heart: he watched the red-headed girl (Michelle was her name) and Nathan (the brother) come home from school every day and would listen to their conversations.

Most of the conversations were arguments where Nathan called Michelle "brainless" and Michelle countered with something like "dweeb" or "turd." However, one conversation that day proved to be most helpful to the budding romantic spirit of Dooby.

Nathan was walking by his sister, beyond her reach should she decide to strike at him. "So how late were you and Dale studying last night?"

“None of your business, turdboy,” Michelle said, flicking her hair. “Just studied for a couple of hours over Spanish.”

Nathan was dancing a little further beyond her reach. “Really? I’d thought it’d be French. The language of loooooove.” Nathan made some kissing noises at his sister. Michelle took a couple of steps at him but he immediately retreated. Catching Nathan was like trying to catch a housefly.

Okay, I did some writing for some sitcoms. So sue me.

“Something you’ll never know about unless you date a blind girl. And she’d probably need her sense of smell gone too.”

“So what do you see in Dale anyway? He must be dumber than a bag of rocks.”

Michelle practically pounced on her little brother. He moved out of the way just in time, but he nearly lost his balance and fell on his butt, Dooby watched his arms pinwheel crazily and almost laughed.

“He is not! He’s sweet and kind and affectionate,” she said. “And he always tells me how beautiful I am.”

The story that I actually sold was a little better. This is just the abridged version. Wait for the moral, kid. It’s the punchline here.

“Big as a semi,” Nathan said.

“Yes—”

“And just as smart.” Nathan took off down the street with his sister right behind him. She was screaming, “Just wait till I get you home.” Dooby, through his

vantage point in the fence, was hypnotized by the sway of her butt enclosed in her tight blue jeans. Dooby was a little too innocent for his own good, but he's not dead.

Dooby was really excited about what he heard because he now had an idea of what Michelle wanted. What got him especially excited was that he, Dooby Radlin, could be those things. He did love her and his father never got tired of telling him how big he was (though big was always followed by a name; for example, "big lumox").

The one thing Dooby wasn't so sure about was talking. Dooby could speak, but was embarrassed by his voice and never spoke in public. He had heard his voice before, and it just made him sad and angry, the way the words he said seemed to echo and twist before they could leave his mouth. He had hoped it would get better when he got older like that one kid on "The Brady Bunch" whose voice was cracking horribly when he tried to sing. However, as time wore on, Dooby thought his voice sounded like some giant's, bellowing and slurred. Plus, his voice always reminded him of his face, and that hand would travel up the burnt side of it. The grooves and patches in it were all too familiar to his hands.

Dooby knew more than he knew anything that if he were to truly have this girl, he would have to be especially sweet and especially charming. And he practiced every night by watching soaps and prime time television for ideas. By the end of the week, Dooby had decided he didn't have a car to fake an accident with and talk with her—not to mention, he didn't have a license—and didn't own a dog to walk that she could see and start talking about.

Dooby did see that some of those couples met on T.V. by bumping into each other accidentally. Afterwards, the two would start talking and they got to go out on a date. On the date, Dooby noticed, they kissed, usually on the girl's doorstep. Dooby decided that it was how he would meet her. He would talk to her, say how much he loved her and would take care of her with all his heart until he died. Then she would have to fall in love with him.

Poor Dooby. It's going to end badly, I hope you know. But no one could have said how bad it would end up.

It was on a Monday. Cloudless day. Sky as blue as tempera paint. She was walking home and Dooby was waiting at his gate. The gate he knew she always walked in front of. She was right on schedule. Except there was no little brother that day. He was off to a friend's house.

Michelle was dressed in blue jeans and a simple T-shirt. Hoop earrings dangling from her ears and maybe just a little too much makeup. She was just bopping along, carrying her books in one hand and brushing her fingernails on the picket fence with the other.

Dooby was waiting to spring on her. For someone who was only at a third grade reading level and near 25, he had a pretty smart plan. Bump into her accidentally and then, after apologizing, would confess his undying devotion to her. He patiently waited for her footsteps and then sprung out.

But Dooby was thrown off his plan by simple physics. The big lummoX was about 300 lbs. while Michelle was about 105 soaking wet. When Dooby stepped out

in front of her, she must not have seen where she was going because when she “bumped” into Dooby, she was knocked flat on her petite ass.

Dooby, you can surmise, was pretty horrified. Books were flung every which way and she was sitting in a puddle from an earlier rain. Probably pretty damn funny if you don’t connect the incident with what happened next, but Dooby saw all his hopes were vanishing in a splash of water on a denim-covered rear end.

She looked up at him and couldn’t catch her breath. Picture it: a girl just walking home from school, minding her own business, when this huge guy with a face like melted wax just plowed you over. She was probably expecting to be raped. Or worse.

Dooby had his confession in his head, but he kinda forgot it in the heat of the moment. All he could say was something like “M-M-M-Muhhhh-shhhhhhlililililil” Before she started screaming to high heaven.

Some deputy sheriff (forgot his name, but I think it was something like Cletus) was driving by when he saw all this commotion. He saw a girl screaming, Dooby standing over her, trying to apologize. He practically stopped his cruiser in the middle of the street, stumbles out and pulls a gun on Dooby. “Freeze, freak” he screamed, aiming the gun at Dooby’s head.

Dooby was scared and crying. Michelle was crabwalking away from Dooby. The sheriff was ready to take Dooby out with a shot to his muddled and scarred head. Dooby could only cry, big tears just pouring down his face, saying “sorry” except it came out like “saaaaweeeeee” because he was blubbing and he was Dooby. He



didn't fight back, just let the deputy, who was also nervous since he came to Dooby's chest, put him in the squad car. They went to the station with Dooby crying like a baby.

In the end, it was nothing too dramatic. Dooby was charged with rape, but let go because there wasn't any evidence. But a lot of people still thought Dooby was dangerous. Lawyers claimed the attack on Michelle Davis, while no intercourse was involved, proved that Dooby's sex drive made him a danger to every female in town. Dooby's dad was declared unfit to raise him after a review of his income and his parenting skills so Dooby was institutionalized. I was going to write that he met his mother while up there, but it doesn't seem too logical to me.

The moral of this story is that beautiful brunette won't go out with you in a million years. See that homely little girl in the corner, glasses and braces and mouse-colored hair? Try her. She looks desperate enough. And it all pretty much looks the same, right?

Just remember that it's always better to settle. If you reach for the stars like that guy on the radio says, there's always a big hand just waiting to slap you down.

Still want to talk to her, kid?

Guess you'll have to learn the hard way.

What Jesus didn't put in Christmas specials

Today  
24 degrees and cloudy  
Light snow falling

"The wind has some big teeth, Grandma."  
But she ignores me and wades out in the snow

Drifts pile high  
To an aluminum foil sky

Lights wink on like stars  
Wisemen get artificial halos  
A snowplow roars by like a raging wooly mammoth

See the boots I got for Christmas?

Why am I such a misfit?  
Why am I such a frequent shopper without a cause  
Besides filling the vacuum of my Christmas spirit?

In a mall that houses Santa's workshop  
A Santa ponders suicide  
A shotgun barrel instead of a Christmas cookie  
To fill the need for peace on Earth  
Pills washed down with sour eggnog

Yet another Santa stabbed by loneliness  
As shoppers surge like rats escaping a ship  
A colony of consumers

A child spends Christmas in a grave  
While the man who put her there  
Tips back a few more

A doctor in a felt hat treats a drive-by victim

A boy is getting all the heroin he wants  
For the next few seconds  
Until it disappears into the valley  
Of the shadow of the Big Toe

Kids are disappointed when they  
Don't get the toy they begged Santa for  
Other kids are too hungry to be disappointed

A child hugs a Santa  
For no discernible reason  
Jolly old Saint Nicholas Correra  
Of 471 Wakefield Way  
Weeps with joy

A drunk pukes in a toilet and  
Passes out as someone takes pics  
For next year's Christmas cards

Dr. Mike saves another soldier for the urban jyhada  
And didn't even lose his cap

A junkie leaves the Earth  
As Clarence  
Gets his colorized wings

Little Sara Jenkins  
Killed by a drunk driver  
Weeps for those still on Earth

A present? What could it be?  
A golden heart. Just what we all need

34 degrees and snowing hard  
I'm dreaming of a virginal white Christmas

Feeling Up a Fallen Angel

Sitting on a back porch  
Remembering the apocalyptic signs  
I saw an angel fall from heaven

I put away my porno mag  
And attended to the angel's need  
I bathed her precious porcelain feet  
Then drank the bath water  
I stroked her wings tenderly  
Tracing the break in them, the imperfections, lovingly  
With a trembling, guilty finger

How I dreamed of ravishing that angel  
Turn her into a soccer mom  
Hanging sheets in the spring sunshine  
Belly bulging beneath a floral print  
Our little cherubim has a dental appointment at 3  
She'd forget heaven in the joy of daytime soaps  
And dishwashing detergents

Alas, she got better—

And took my soul with her

May the wind remove my footprints

Watch  
Sand in the hourglass  
Stones on a grave  
Heart leaking  
Catch it in my hand or they'll find me

Where is the sun?  
Is the moon red?  
Has Father been dead long?  
Which star can I follow?

Clouds heavy with loss  
Rain falls like Lucifer  
Forever falling  
Do you have a minute?  
Did the floor move under us?  
Don't tell them I'm here

Can you breathe?  
Is this the same sand that bore  
Moses' footprint?  
Does it have to bear mine?  
Remember, don't tell them I'm here.

I grab some sand  
Put it in my pocket  
Time is now with me  
But the hounds come closer

I must remember  
How to go with the flow of the river Lethe

If only I can reach it in time  
If only . . .

### Bless the Beasts and Children

When she entered the church hall, Arthur Dailey was distinctly reminded of the last wedding he had performed because she moved like a bride. Even in her worn high-tops, jeans and sweatshirt that looked two sizes too big, she seemed to glide beside the empty pews with purpose. She was nervous. Her brown hair formed a veil over her face when she stared at her shoes but her tiny feet seemed to be driving themselves, carrying their nervous passenger to the altar. The large sweatshirt seemed to take years off her, yet the jeans were tight enough to show the taut and muscular contours of her leg.

He was thinking of his family, especially his children, Simone and Peter. He spent many mornings talking of Christmas and Jesus and presents, trying to be happy for the children's sake, but he couldn't. Simone and Peter would listlessly eat their meals. They could sense something was wrong with the family. Esther, his wife, merely stared at her food as if expecting to find a message from God in it. But Arthur's mind quickly moved from that house of despair where he had spent most of his adult life. Thoughts of his family were submerged under the vision approaching him, his thoughts changed from his children to her as easily as flipping a switch.

The moisture had evaporated in his mouth and he felt a familiar surge in his groin. His pants had suddenly become uncomfortable as he pretended to be fumbling with scenery for the Christmas play, a backdrop crudely painted to look like a stable. His sweater, bought as a Christmas present from his wife at a J.C. Penny, now

seemed to be stifling. Outside, the wind howled and Arthur wondered if it was snowing outside.

"Pearl" was said by the minister, spat from his dry mouth just to keep her from realizing he was staring.

"Hello, Father," she said. "How's the play going?"

Arthur smiled, almost sickly as he realized his hands were becoming clammy. "Well as can be expected. Johnny Lowman's almost got his lines down. And no need to call me Father."

"Sorry."

The silence went on for a minute. Arthur noticed Pearl's eyes were looking up to a stained glass window where Jesus was looking, head lowered, as a halo shown around him.

"How's your wife?" she suddenly asked. She was now looking at all the stained glass windows, showing various angels, crosses and holy warriors as though looking for meaning in them. Her fingers tapped a small staccato on her thigh.

Arthur's features visibly stiffened into a mask as though even a smile would crack his face like a china plate. "Mrs. Dailey's fine, Pearl. She's resting comfortably."

"She probably needs a lot of rest right now." Howard could feel those eyes on his back like insect legs. "Doesn't need a lot of shock after what she's been through."

"Yes," Howard said, looking at the plastic Baby Jesus in its crib. Glassy eyes and distant smile. "It was a . . . tragic accident, but it was God's will. I have to think of

Job and how he endured.” God’s will. The words became a mantra following the automobile accident that nearly killed his wife. They became jibberish when he saw his unborn son die in an incubator, unable to feel his father’s love.

“I’m sorry about your loss, Artie.”

Howard’s head suddenly sprang up like a jack-in-the-box. “Don’t call me Artie. Not here!” he hissed. No one was in the church. His wife was no doubt sleeping in the rectory, and she slept like the dead. But Arthur was gripped with the sudden irrational fear of being struck dead for blasphemy.

Pearl’s brow wrinkled slightly, but she seemed rather unmoved by Howard’s statement like she expected it. “I prayed for you and your wife, Reverend.” She was up by the altar. “You deserve to be happy. Everyone does.”

Arthur pretended to study the microphone connections, absorbing himself in his work. “How are the roads outside?”

“They’re getting worse. I may need you to give me a ride home when you’re finished here since you have that big 4X4.”

“What about your father, Pearl?”

“He just dropped me off. Mom had to work late, then so did he. They don’t like to leave me home alone after I went to the hospital, so I just told them I could help you out with the Christmas play.” She was closer to Arthur now. A hand stroked his back, mittenless. Howard jumped, his face flushed, his blood became like lava. He almost jumped behind the organ for protection.



“No, we can’t do that. Not here.” He felt the erection bulging in his pants and prayed to God that He would simply take the blood from his organ and divert it somewhere else.

Pearl smiled, impish and vacant at the same time. “But we did do it here. Remember that night? I was helping you put some stuff up in the attic?”

Arthur did remember that night. How beautiful she had looked after the grime and sweat had settled on her, the musk of her sweat, the mussed hair. And the way she was openly flirting with him in the room full of old paperback copies of religious texts and old toys from Arthur’s and Esther’s childhood. It was before the snow. In fact, it was unseasonably springlike. Arthur had the window open and he was kissing her as the traffic roared by.

Arthur was unable to speak for a long time. His skin felt like the blood in it was replaced with ice water. His heart seemed to leap up into his throat and down into the pit of his stomach.

Pearl was looking at the stained glass window, a dove with an olive branch in its beak, its flight forever halted. “You were better than a lot of the other boys I was with, father. All they wanted to do was get off. I might as well not have been there.”

Arthur wanted to move, desperately wanted to move. But she was snuggling closer to him now, her hands sliding across his back then over his chest. Whenever he felt the ghostly passing of her hand across his body, Arthur reflexively moved that part away from her as though she were deadly to the touch.

“I really wanted to tell you what a lovely night it was, Father.” Her voice was in his ear, a breezy whisper. She moved in front of him. As he stood up, she stood up as well. Painted nails moved down the front of his sweater then past the sweater to the crotch of his jeans. Pearl kissed his neck and he could smell her fragrance, a perfume with strawberries. The plastic baby doll fell from his hands, its plastic skull smacking against the side of the manger.

“Oh, Pearl.” Her touch brought back an assortment of images, of the other meetings when Esther was sick with migraines or shopping or out of town. Pearl loved finding new and exciting places to perform their secret transgressions but he had never done it in the church before. Could never bring himself to totally give into her wiles in a place where God’s eyes shone the brightest. Howard could feel small breasts pushing into his chest as she held him close. They kissed. Their tongues fenced. Nimble hands worked at his belt.

Even as the thrill went through him and he waited for the belt to loosen, he was suddenly struck with an image. The family portraits taken at Sears for \$34.99. Arthur in a charcoal suit, Esther in a dress and the twins in their Sunday bests. All three of them are smiling. He could see the children’s faces, the sandy blonde hair, the lopsided grins with baby teeth missing. God, they were so happy then. Not the sallow phantoms they were now. He didn’t really love Esther anymore, never saw her unless she was reading a paperback in bed or curled into a fetal ball with a migraine, but he couldn’t do it to the kids. Not anymore.

“Pearl, no,” he said. The warmth on his skin was extinguished as fast as if he was doused with cold water, leaving behind the clamminess. She was kissing his neck.

“Pearl, stop.” His voice was growing in strength. Like on Sunday mornings when he would stray from his usual message about God being love and talk about Revelations, the fire and war that would cleanse the Earth.

“NO!” he said, gently pushing her away, backing away slowly as though she was an angered rattlesnake. Pearl tripped on a wire and went back against the cardboard set, knocking it down. She fell on her rear and looked dejected and angry, angry enough to rip out the minister’s eyes with her tiny hands.

“Why did you do that?” The words came from Pearl in an even slowness that made her sound like she was talking in her sleep. Arthur could see her fingers flexing, her painted nails made to look like unsheathed claws.

“I can’t do this anymore, Pearl.” His voice was strong, stronger than what could be contained in his reed of a body. He was standing to his full, gangly six feet four in height. “I won’t do this.”

“What do you mean?” Pearl said, her voice indicating she was realizing her advances were being rejected, the hurt seeping into her voice. “I thought we had something. Really had something.”

“I won’t do this. It stops now.” Arthur was slightly worried because he could not seem to say anything but restating his refusal, but he willed his face to show no weaknesses. He saw Pearl’s face scrunch up like an infant’s ready to cry even as she

attempted to rise to her feet in a dignified fashion. He saw her dig her nails into her palms.

“It can’t be over. It just can’t. We have a family together . . .”

“I have my family to worry about, Pearl. I can’t go on like this.” Then he added as almost an afterthought, “I’m sorry.”

She was breathing heavily—large, heaving breaths—even as fat tears were rolling down her cheek. “What about our baby?”

Arthur’s heart seemed to stop in his chest as though a bullet was put through it. The world itself actually seemed to stop. He could no longer hear the wind blowing outside. He was stuck in a vacuum where the only sound he could hear was the sobs that visibly lifted Pearl’s shoulders.

“I took the test. The box said it was foolproof.”

It took a few minutes for Arthur to find his voice. “Those tests can be wrong. You need to see a doctor—”

“I was going to ask you to take me, Father.”

God, Arthur thought, she looks like Simone when she scraped her knee that time. Her face wrinkled up in hurt, her face red and eyes swollen from crying, and the bloodshot eyes needing reassurance, a hug and/or kiss. Arthur could not do that to Pearl because a hug and/or kiss was what got him in this mess in the first place.

“I could, I suppose.” The altruistic instinct was kicking in, even as the repercussions of the discovery of a minister fathering a teenager’s bastard child

seeped into his brain and rendered it inert as a stone. "Then we can see about adoption—"

"No" came Pearl's reply.

A hand nearly struck out, like it was spring-loaded, and slapped Pearl across the face. He shoved it in his pocket. Arthur was now gnawing on his lower lip. "But, Pearl, we have to give it up. You're too young to raise a child and it could go with some good parents . . ."

"Well, what about us?" said Pearl in anguish, screaming at the minister as though he were totally thickheaded. "We could raise it. You always say how you don't like your marriage."

Arthur now cursed himself for his need for confession after the act. "But I can't simply leave my family. You know that."

"What about your other family? What about the mother of your child?"

"Are you sure it's mine, Pearl?" The question came from a cold, logical portion of his mind. Arthur latched onto that part of him like a rock in the middle of the rapids.

"It has to be yours. I haven't been having sex with anyone else since I met you."

Arthur could practically feel his soul sink to the bottom of his shoes. No logic, no person, no faith could save him now. He was in too deep a shock to figure just how much he has lost, only that he felt unredeemable.

"We can't keep it, Pearl."

“Yes, we can. We can run away. People are saying I can pass for eighteen. We could leave the country. We—”

The slap came from the same hand Pearl latched onto. It was the hand not in his pocket. The force made Pearl do a pirouette and she tumbled to the ground. Arthur looked at her blankly, then at his hand.

Pearl got up and ran out of the church, pregnant and into the blinding snow. Arthur stood, breathing through his nostrils then letting a few tears roll down his cheeks.

Later that night, after his family was put to bed, Howard loaded some of his possessions in a Bronco. He wrote no letter, no note explaining himself. That would come later when he could explain it himself. He stood and looked at the snow covering the roads and the snow pouring out of the sky. He briefly thought of not going, but he would have to go tonight because he couldn't stay here any longer. He couldn't look at his wife or his children. Arthur wished he was as brave as them. He wished he was more like Job.

The snow was no problem for the four-wheel drive on the Bronco and Arthur made it out of the state when the sun rose over the hilltops.